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## A Post-War Paradox of Informality in South Lebanon: Rebuilding Houses or Destroying Legitimacy

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### Abstract

Recent multiethnic Lebanese history has been characterised by a high degree of tension between sectarian groups and the state. In a number of cases, minority groups' resistance to localised majority groups developed into a manifest attempt to limit the action of the central authority by embracing alternative loyalties, both transnational and interreligious. Makdisi (2000) argues that in a multiconfessional Lebanon the old-fashioned idea of longstanding violence between competing sects is unsustainable. However, political microanalysis based on empirical material collected in South Lebanon during and after the 2006 war shows that in situations where state and ethno-religious groups fail to establish a dialogue, tension leads citizens to view the state as alien and other groups as enemies.

With reference to Christian minority group responses, this paper looks at the ways Hizbullah post-conflict *strategies of reconstruction* have been legitimated. Considering the Weberian notion of the state's sole power and Prato's (2000) analysis of citizen loyalties to the state as a welfare provider, and reassessing this notion with empirical data collected in conflictual loci, this paper examines the rise of a religion-driven movement in a scenario marked by dramatic economic transformation. The analysis suggests that group denial of the state's role is most evident at a local level, where sectarian attitudes (e.g. concerning land or property issues) take precedence over nationally based loyalties and where this denial is the only perceptible means of survival for both the individual and his or her group.

**Keywords:** South Lebanon, christian minorities, land transaction, Hizbullah, informal economy.

### Prologue

On 14 August 2006, a United Nations sponsored ceasefire went into effect in South Lebanon, thereby ending a 33-day conflict between the Israel Defence Forces (IDF) and the Lebanese Shia paramilitary militia Hizbullah. On 15 August, as promised and extensively advertised during the war, Hizbullah began to rebuild or compensate for any conflict-related damage. Months later, the Lebanese government and some churches also started to assist with reconstruction.

Field research conducted by the author in South Lebanon before and during the 2006 war placed a major emphasis on Christian minority group responses to political (and ethno-religious) mobilisation (Mollica, 2006). Since the end of the war, however, the author has redirected his attention to the ways in which Hizbullah's post-conflict political and economic strategies have been legitimated, leading to widespread political support and tacit accommodation. Although Hizbullah's relief action was financed by unknown sources, it was available to the entire community regardless of religious affiliation. Here formal and informal practices met publicly and were publicly accepted. Thus, the overall debate over post-war reconstruction in Lebanon raises the question of whether there should have been constraints upon accepting money from a paramilitary (and as such illegal) organisation,

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which is also a political (and as such legal) movement. Furthermore, it is unclear how certain recipients (such as, in this case, Christian minorities) could justify the acceptance of money from a militia with unclear political objectives that claimed to represent the nation but was chosen along sectarian lines.

## Introduction

During the 2006 war, the author was in Lebanon with a Christian group trapped in a Christian enclave on the Israeli border. The Hizbullah TV channel *Al Manar* was available due to two hours of daily electricity provided by a local generator. During periods of intense bombing, *Al Manar*'s spokespeople repeatedly said, "We will rebuild everything they destroy". Based on the extent of the damage, it was difficult to see how that could be possible either logistically or financially. Nevertheless, after the war concluded, Hizbullah followed through on its promise. At the end of the summer war<sup>1</sup> between Hizbullah and Israel, Hizbullah's clerical leadership celebrated a 'divine' victory with victory rallies throughout Lebanon, Syria and Iran. Linked financially, militarily and theologically with Shia Iran,<sup>2</sup> Hizbullah was to polarise Lebanon, deepening the divide between its many groups and substantially damaging national cohesion (Mollica, 2010).

Hizbullah had attacked an Israeli unit, calling the action 'Operation Truthful Promise'. Hizbullah claimed that Israel had broken a deal to release prisoners and that violent action was the only response left to them. In keeping with a longstanding request, Hizbullah asked for an Israeli withdrawal from the so-called *Shebaa* Farms, predicated the legitimacy of its resistance to Israel on the basis of liberating occupied land. In fact, the roots of Hizbullah go back to the Movement of the Deprived founded by the Iranian-Lebanese philosopher Imam Moussa Sadr (Ajami, 1985): a socio-economic movement that reorganised the Lebanese Shia community in the 1970s as a reaction to the decomposition of the rural Lebanese world and growing urbanisation. However, it was also a political movement against Israel, claiming to act for all the 'deprived' beyond sectarianism (Nasr, 1985).

Officially, Israel retaliated against Hizbullah's seizure of two of its soldiers. Israel called the Hizbullah attack an act of war and promised a *painful* response. However, Israel clarified that this action was not against Lebanon. The Lebanese government denied any involvement in the kidnappings, despite the fact that the Lebanese consociational model gives every religious component, including Shia groups, representation in the Executive (Kerr, 2005). Such a situation created a serious blackout within the government as some ministers supported Hizbullah action.

The Israeli-Lebanese war ended on 14 August 2006, when the United Nations Security Council unanimously approved Resolution 1701, which put an end to the hostilities on the basis of a seven-point plan that increased the presence of the United Nations Interim Force in southern Lebanon (known as UNIFIL) and called for the disarming of all militias. However, Hizbullah did not return the bodies of the two captured Israeli soldiers (kidnapped during the action that started the war in the early morning of 12 July 2006) until two years later (on 17 July 2008). The exchange, involving Hizbullah and Palestinian prisoners and the bodies of about 200 other militants, was part of a wider bargain struck with the Israeli authorities.<sup>3</sup>

What follows is mostly concerned with follow-up field research (including a dozen semi-structured interviews with both Christian political and Maronite and Greek Catholic religious leaders and entrepreneurs) conducted from 2010 to 2013. The content also includes a local assessment,

1 Despite hundreds of thousands of displaced Israelis, important economic implications and a war cost of \$1.6 billion (Borger, 2006), the Israeli government only defined the conflict as a 'war' on 25 March 2007.

2 Hizbullah's clerically led executive and political councils were integrated after the war, with two organs added to the Jihad Council: the Auxiliary Units (an irregular militia) and the Lebanese Defense Brigades (a cross-sectarian militia) (Rabil, 2008).

3 On that day, the coffins said to contain the remains of Ehud Goldwasser and Eldad Regev were taken to the Israel-Lebanon border (Haaretz, 17 July 2008).

via participant observation, with reference to the trajectory of that initial Hizbullah promise and the behavioural changes of the Christians who accompanied the author during the war, with an emphasis on the ways they reacted to Hizbullah money. This Christian population had no connection to Hizbullah. However, the dynamics of the amalgamation of formal and informal funding sources linked to the reconstruction would involve the entire community.

## The Provider

Hizbullah policy was in line with what Eicklman (2001, p. 331) terms ‘new Muslim politics’, where ‘being Muslim’ plays a role in the way people think “collectively and concretely about themselves and *their society*” [author’s italics]. This ‘new’ Muslim politics is thus ideological and, by implication, aims at a wider audience. Levitt (2006) explains a similar dynamic by looking at the relationship between Hamas social services and associated political activism. Other examples can be found both in the region and beyond. In Islamic countries such as Turkey, pro-Islamist parties (e.g. Welfare in the mid-1990s and the Justice and Development Party [AKP] later on) are well known for their informal but effective charity work (Delibaş, 2009), whereas in other regions the relationship between formal welfare providers and the people have been shaped by structural factors (Kasearu & Kutsar, 2010; Polese, Morris, Nodelsen, & Kovacs, 2014; Requena, 2013) or the emergence of new donors (Hristova Kurzydowski, 2013; Connolly & Sicard, 2012). Dingley (2009) comes to similar conclusions by reference to (Provisional) Sinn Féin’s informal welfare system in Northern Irish Republican-held sectors. In addition, the challenges to the political order and its subsequent reproduction in the management of public resources have been investigated by Kassimir (2001, p. 96-99) in his analysis of a Christian Ugandan NGO assuming ‘state-like’ functions. Other works of detailed ethnographic comparative research on insurgent groups interacting with social service systems in conflictual loci are addressed in Kevlihan (2007, 2013) and Metelits (2010), the latter also presenting the means used to achieve strategic aims in insurgent-held areas (ranging from the use of violence to providing public goods).

Prior to the 2006 war, Hizbullah was well known for its social service institutions, which were located in predominantly Shia areas but traditionally served anyone requesting help. Much of the funding was raised domestically, but Hizbullah also received alleged subsidies from Iran. Several Hizbullah-sponsored societies are actually branches of Iranian organisations. Others were created by Hizbullah, most notably the *Jehad al Binaa* [Reconstruction Campaign] Developmental Organisation, which repaired much of the war damage.<sup>4</sup>

With reference to Iran, some sources report that Iranian support of Hizbullah has angered many Iranians waiting for money to rebuild homes damaged by wars or natural disasters. However, Iranian officials insist that Iran’s support of Hizbullah is moral, not material (Zadeh, 2006; Nasrallah, 2012). Nevertheless, a widely used slogan during the 2009 Iranian protest (the so-called Green Revolution) was: “Money to Iran, not to Hizbullah”.

In 2006, Hizbullah was put to an extraordinary test. The party’s actions showed competence that won extensive support among many Lebanese. Support for Hizbullah was, however, increased by the bombing of mosques and churches and the use of illegal weapons by the Israelis (Jamail, 2006; Mollica, 2006). Evidence of Hizbullah’s efficient grassroots social service network, as opposed to services provided by the Lebanese government, was visible everywhere (Kifner, 2006; Mollica, 2006). Hizbullah

4 Hizbullah ran construction companies, schools, hospitals, dispensaries and microfinance initiatives, such as the *al-Qard al-Hasan* [Good Loan], which in early 2007 could offer some 750 small loans a month. Other Iranian branches’ organisations were: the Islamic Charity *Emdad*, the Martyr’s Association and the Association for the Wounded. Other Hizbullah organizations were the Hizbullah Women’s Committee and the Islamic Health Committee (Norton, 2007; Rishani, 2012).

was already running community projects in what the South Lebanese perceived to be the absence of the Lebanese government. Hizbullah had a good reputation as a well-ordered social organisation and surprised many people with how quickly it mobilised its organisational machine (Besheer, 2006; Hizbullah launches reconstruction jihad, 2006).

During the war, Hizbullah never stopped advertising its intention to repair all war-related damage. Some Hizbullah opponents questioned whether the reconstruction work Hizbullah was showing on television was real (Hollander, 2006), since Hizbullah began its reconstruction program with a heavy dose of propaganda. According to Cambanis (2006), some Hizbullah activists even claimed credit for work carried out by the government's civil defence service.

## The Damage

The 2006 war severely damaged the Lebanese infrastructure (including Rafiq Hariri Beirut International Airport, ports, schools and hospitals), displaced almost one million Lebanese, and ended the lives of 1,300 people (Norwegian Refugee Council Report, 2006). In addition, the war left large areas of territory littered with unexploded cluster bombs and had a substantial impact on the Lebanese economy.<sup>5</sup> The damage was estimated at \$3.6 billion (Harris, 2012, p. 271). On 30 January 2008, however, the Israeli government's Winograd Commission (Winograd Committee, 2008, January 30) concluded that the IDF had committed no violation, as claimed by others – e.g. the Amnesty International Report (2006, August 23).

Despite the heavy fighting, however, Hizbullah survived the conflict and was on the ground at the end of the war. On 14 September 2006, the Economist wrote, "The speed, efficiency and propaganda of Hizbullah's reconstruction offensive have caught Lebanon's flimsy government off the mark, and helped bolster the party's popularity beyond its core Shia supporters".

Hizbullah reconstruction efforts created an uncertain scenario, since it was a crucial political victory (Rabil, 2008). These efforts were possible because of an immediate influx of money to the movement. In his victory speech, Hizbullah's Secretary General Sheik Hassan Nasrallah said, "Completing the victory can come with reconstruction". Almost immediately, "hundreds of Hizbullah members spread over dozens of villages across southern Lebanon cleaning and surveying damage" (Kifner, 2006).

In Lebanon, Nasrallah's credibility was unquestioned, even by many Christian informants whom the author spoke to who strongly opposed Hizbullah. Nasrallah was and still is seen as a serious political leader, portrayed even by his opponents as someone who never lies.

The damage in southern Lebanon was severe, both in areas where the Israeli and Hizbullah ground forces fought and where the IDF operated. The 23 August 2006, Amnesty International Report documented streets scarred with artillery craters and damage from the targeting of houses, supermarkets, auto service stations and petrol stations. In some villages, the damage affected 50% of all structures (Arkin, 2007).

The author himself can confirm that there were at least three weeks of continuous bombings (including cluster bombs) and strikes, which he witnessed from a ferro-concrete room in the southern Christian enclave of Alma el-Shaab, where he was trapped while doing fieldwork in the summer of 2006 (Mollica, 2006, 2008, 2010).

<sup>5</sup> The Lebanese government officially reported nearly 120,000 homes destroyed or damaged, 862 schools destroyed and 91 demolished bridges (IRIN Report, 2007, September 2), although these data have been contested (Arkin, 2007).

## Alma el-Shaab

Alma el-Shaab, the author's main locus of research, has a voting population of around 2,400. However, some 1,000 *Almawy* (as locals call themselves) live outside its borders, either in Beirut or Tyre or outside Lebanon (Gulf states, USA, Europe). The highest voter turnout percentage in municipal elections has been around 70%, and the percentage decreases sharply for national elections. It is also difficult to tell how many votes come from persons who visit on weekends or for the summer. Most of them live in the Christian quarters of Tyre or Beirut. Neither the mayor nor the deputy mayor live in the village, and the mayor does not even live in Lebanon.

The population of the village consists of Maronites, Greek Catholics and Protestants. A similar religious amalgamation can be found in the author's other field site, the Christian quarter of Tyre, also home to a Latin and Greek Orthodox population.

*Abuna* [Father] Marun, the Maronite priest of Alma el-Shaab, was the only parish priest in town during the war. He states,

*My mission is to be with the population. If people stay here, I cannot leave. In Lebanon we have the example of 1948 and the followings (sic), when the Palestinians left their country. Being here is also being with the land [author's italics]. During the war we had Holy Mass. The bell was ringing. However, nobody can make an obligation and force people to stay. It is a personal and moral decision. (Abuna Marun, Alma el-Shaab Maronite parish priest)*

By the end of the war, Alma had 50 destroyed houses, 120 damaged houses, one death and ten injuries. No damage was reported in the Christian quarter of Tyre. Since then, locals have been struggling to avoid direct political involvement. Given the instability of regional and national scenarios, they oppose the establishment of any national party branch in the village area.

*If we give the right to have one party [branch], then there will be ten in one day. (Informant living in Alma)*

Thus, they do not have political parties. When Hizbullah leaders want to communicate with the locals, they speak to their leaders (i.e. priests, Muhtar [head of village]). The locals are well aware of this.

*We do not know for how long we can go on. Hizbullah is very intelligent. (Informant living in Alma).*

Hizbullah has made and maintains a good impression on many strata of the Lebanese population. At the end of the war, Hassan Nasrallah, Hizbullah's Secretary General, said, "We cannot wait for the government and its heavy vehicles and machinery because they could come in a while". He also cautioned, "No one should raise prices due to a surge in demand" (Kifner, 2006). Soon after, some areas were closed by Hizbullah for fear of theft; residents were allowed to enter only after being issued special passes (Hundreds of, 2006, August 16; author's informants' personal communications). As Nasrallah had promised, his party was to lead the reconstruction effort (Cambanis, 2006).

## They opened their bags

On the very day the ceasefire went into effect, Nasrallah appeared on television and promised to help the Lebanese rebuild their houses, pay their rent, and/or buy furniture. He did not say where the money would come from, but Hizbullah had already been using Iranian money to fund charity

work and social welfare programs (Manyok, 2013). A few hours later, hundreds of Lebanese reported damage estimates to Hizbullah agents (Djansezian, 2006). By the next day, Nasrallah was able to give a precise accounting of damage and officially launch a rebuilding program.

Hizbullah's move to take a leading role in post-conflict reconstruction is consistent with ongoing tensions between the movement and the Lebanese state as both strive to build or maintain legitimacy. Hizbullah was already challenging the state in what was supposed to be the state's exclusive domain of power, that is, pace Weber (1919), the use of force as a legitimate means.<sup>6</sup> Hizbullah does not officially claim any section of the state, not even in areas where non-Shia communities are demographically insignificant, nor has Hizbullah ever represented itself as an alternative to the central state and its authority. Hizbullah's resistance to an occupying force, that is Israel, was officially made with the exclusive intention of defending Lebanon from Israeli incursions, and the legitimacy of its use of force was predicated on that basis. On the one hand, however, in Hizbullah-held quarters and sectors (mostly in South Lebanon, Beirut city and the Bequaa Valley) the contradictions and failure of the Lebanese consociational model are manifest, because this political group maintains a military branch (Mollica, 2010). On the other hand, in line with a point raised by Magouirk (2008) considering other conflictual areas, Hizbullah utilises social service activities and anti-corruption campaigns to gain support by promising to be a better distributor of resources and public services than the current regime, thereby exercising non-violent power.

During the 2006 war, Hizbullah continued to use force despite international pressure and resolutions from the state and the United Nations. After the war, however, Hizbullah increased its support to the Lebanese population, since the state was perceived as absent. Hizbullah was a major actor in the welfare system (Mollica, 2008, 2010), operating in place of the state in a moment of crisis, at a time when state support should have been stronger. On the one hand, it represented the translation of a social struggle into religious codes. Here the use of religious symbolism returned to the collective memory of the community. The same symbols used for the charismatic cult of the Imam Moussa Sadr (Nasr, 1985, p. 144-145) in the 1970s were now directed towards Nasrallah. On the other hand, the party could now broaden its base support beyond religious lines. People did not care where Hizbullah's money came from, and Hizbullah was soon able to provide precise data on future relief efforts. For a lost home, compensation was made in two parts with a maximum of \$40,000, or one part if under \$8,000, plus rent (IRIN Report, 2007, September 2). After all, the cost of the war was going to be extremely high, as stated by a report submitted by the Lebanese government to the Paris III Conference in January 2007. Some 50,000 families had been financially affected by the war (MEMRI Report, 2007, July 22), including Christians, most of whom were living in the south and perceived themselves as a minority, geographically isolated from the Christians in Central and North Lebanon. However, Hizbullah would eventually also turn its attention to them.

*Hizbullah rebuilt everything. They finished everything. They gave money even to people who did not have damage. Many even lied to get money. Depending on the damage, they paid from \$100 to \$60,000. Later they even paid for the trees: from \$100 to \$200 per each tree. In Alma they gave money to 50 families. They also paid some \$20,000 for animals, for we have two big farms for cows and chickens. Hizbullah, we assume, got money from Iran and paid in US dollars, brand new, in packets with serial numbers from bank, brought in black bags. They came without weapons, three on a car, with the money. They opened the bag in the municipality and gave money to those who signed in to get compensation. Hizbullah paid*

<sup>6</sup> Weber (1919) defines the modern state in terms of its peculiar means, "as to every political association, namely, the use of physical force", thus stressing the relation between state and violence as an intimate one. A state is "a human community that (successfully) claims the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force within a given territory", territory being just one of the characteristics of the state. However, the right to make use of physical force may be given "to other institutions or to individuals", but "only to the extent to which the state permits it", for the state is the 'sole source of the right to use violence'.



*even for injuries and casualties. Some took advantage, for instance, dividing a house into two units, to get double the money. Some signed without damage. Some got \$1,000 for a damaged glass. (Informant from Alma, living in Beirut)*

The situation was similar in the Tyre city centre:

*They [Hizbullah] rebuilt everything and even paid the rent for five years. They paid for every casualty. Hizbullah made houses better than before. If there was a damaged house, Hizbullah came. Someone says that they did the list [author's italics] with the government. (Informant from Tyre)*

*Hizbullah wanted to show that they dealt with all [religious] groups. To clarify the point, they went to Christian villages and Christian quarters. They had to show their moderate face. Everybody knew they were paying, including UNIFIL. However, giving money to Christians was a small thing and did not change their wider aim. Christian villages and Christian quarters that got money do not have any power. Hizbullah already has its hands on these areas. It would not change their [Christians'] situation. Without law or governments they [the Christians] are sheep in their [Hizbullah's] hands. We could be immediately forced to leave our houses. (Informant from Alma with an economic activity in Tyre)*

*After the war we had no roads, no electricity and no water. The majority of our population had problems with houses. People did not know if they had to wait or if they should return. It was tough. We suffer more as a population. We live on the border. At the beginning, I was against getting money. I told the municipality that before getting money, it would be better to make a damage assessment. (Abuna Marun, Alma el-Shaab Maronite parish priest)*

Clearly, local religious authorities were concerned about the dynamics, not the idea, of Hizbullah distributing money. Christians understood that in the short term no one except Hizbullah was going to help. Thus, they accepted the money without constraint, wherever it came from. The Christians' concern was for the long term, for whether accepting money would jeopardise their freedom – a freedom already threatened by negative demographic trends. They wondered if there were any limits to the religious community's influence over its members. Moreover, the situation raised questions about the relationship between religious attitudes of South Lebanese Christians and their economic actions (in this case, the acceptance of money from Hizbullah). An informant from Alma living in Beirut clarifies the point:

*The first village that got paid was Alma. It was one the worst hit Christian villages. They started paying the day after the war ended. It was because it was a Christian village. Everyone accepted money, exception done for the churches. People afraid of not receiving money from the government accepted Hizbullah money. A local religious leader suggested not accepting. People asked him if he could find money instead. He said he could not. End of discussion. (Informant from Alma, living in Beirut)*

To paraphrase Mill ([1859] 2010, p. 12), those holding power are not always the same people over whom power is exercised, above all in reference to religious people and the local dimension of this power. But Christians have not signed any pact to give power to their community, or to any recently overarching sovereign body that they, pace Rousseau, have helped to establish. The problem, however, lies in the liminal terrain that marks the local and the national dimension; it is felt even more when (ethno-religious) loyalties become transnational and transnational affiliations are seen as incompatible. Some informants help define the parameters of this incompatibility by referencing Hizbullah's 'honesty' and comparing Hizbullah to other political groups.



*There are differences, of course. Amal [the other Shia party, whose leader is the current President of the Chamber, Nabih Berry] was getting money from the government [here the reference is to criticisms that Amal allegedly participated in activities, such as trafficking, nepotism and providing employment to unqualified persons, as was happening in other parties]. Hizbullah was getting money from Iran. Hizbullah had a team, with some sub-teams for the evaluation of the damage. (Informant from Alma with an economic activity in Tyre)*

*Hizbullah's payments were unconditional. They did not want anything in return, such as their own builders for the work of construction. After all, in Alma there is just one local constructor and one painting company. Companies came from surrounding villages of various religious denominations. Hizbullah had names for builders and furniture costs. There was no control. Later, much later, the Lebanese government gave money. At the beginning, it was just half of the amount. Then they set up a commission to assess the work. Finally, if proved that it was properly done, they gave the remaining. However, even for the government, there was no control. (Informant from Alma living in Beirut)*

Hizbullah was seen as a reliable political party because the behaviour of its members was strictly religious. There was no doubt about this. Party members could not be involved in any illegal activity, as might be the case with anyone else (including other Shia groups).

One must ask how Hizbullah could manage the funding in order to avoid any control, assuming someone would dare to exert financial control.

*Imagine you own a house and you rent two shops. If the total value was \$50,000, Hizbullah would give you the sum and you would look after the reconstruction. Otherwise, Hizbullah might give you a sum to pay the rent for one year, and then they would look after the reconstruction. That's what happened in Tyre. Hizbullah made contacts with some companies, such as Waad [Promise], a Hizbullah-controlled company. In Tyre, the majority preferred to have the house reconstructed and got the rent. (Informant from Alma living in Tyre)*

Hizbullah gave millions of dollars in cash. Those making claims only had to bring their identification cards and proof that they owned or rented a damaged or destroyed house or apartment. In most cases, people received compensation within 48 hours. Hizbullah did not differentiate on religious grounds (Besheer, 2006). Hizbullah paid for all damages or sent their workers to do the job (The Economist, 2006, September 14). Critics were persistent in asking about the source of Hizbullah money. The party maintained that the money came from donations (Besheer, 2006). But, as a matter of fact, many emergency generators were sent by Iran, and temporary water tanks were set up by foreign donor agencies (Fox News, 2006, August 16; author's informants' personal communications). Flush with cash from Islamic charities and Shia groups, Hizbullah was able to hire contractors and give money to the displaced even before the shooting stopped. Party officials described the budget as 'without limit'. In the meantime, the Lebanese government continued to discuss its own reconstruction plan and search for reconstruction financing from Western and Arab donors (Cambanis, 2006). On the other hand, it announced no plans to assist the homeless and displaced (Besheer, 2006).

Hizbullah deployed its machinery, hundreds of engineers and thousands of workers across the country, spending hundreds of thousands of dollars (Cambanis, 2006), while utilising its controlled company *Waad* to channel Iranian funds into rehabilitation activities. According to Israeli sources, Iran's emissaries brought suitcases stuffed with dollars and distributed \$12,000 in cash to every Shia family whose house had been destroyed and who had applied for assistance (Shapira, 2009). In less than a week, Hizbullah's effort surpassed the central government's bureaucracy. The group was ready to enter the country's post-war political dynamics (Cambanis, 2006). After all, Hizbullah had declared

a sort of war against Israel, de facto replacing the authority of the state. Hizbullah also seemed poised to replace the Lebanese government as the legitimate welfare authority (a role the group was, informally, already playing).

## Replacing the State

Hizbullah directed the reconstruction work while ignoring the central government, which reinforced its influence well beyond the Shia community (Shapira, 2009). Nasrallah could even legitimise Hizbullah's unknown funding sources against the known funding sources of the Lebanese government. On the first anniversary of the ceasefire, Nasrallah could easily accuse the government of delaying compensation, saying that while the state had received \$1 billion to assist individuals harmed by the war, Hizbullah had already spent \$381 million (IRIN Report, 2007, September 2). Some countries, such as Qatar, managed projects directly, adopting border villages; meanwhile, the United Arab Emirates restored many schools, and Iran alone assumed some 1,300 projects (IRIN Report, 2007, September 2). After all, the receipt of substantial foreign aid following a crisis was nothing new to modern Lebanese history (Gaspard, 2004, p. 216).

At the 2007 Paris III Conference, the Lebanese government submitted a reform program to stimulate growth, create employment and maintain socio-political stability. However, caught in a daily struggle for its own survival, the government could do little to implement its project. Dissatisfied with the Lebanese government's performance, donors withheld part of the promised funds (MEMRI Report, 2008, July 22).

*Then the Lebanese government arrived and paid for the real cost. So people got money twice. For political reasons, the government wanted to show that they were responsible for its citizens. The government got money from Qatar, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia. But they stole half of the money. The Lebanese government paid in checks and Lebanese liras; Hizbullah paid in cash and US dollars. (Informant from Alma living in Beirut)*

Government delays and perceptions of endemic corruption and widespread incapability (legitimated by the international community withdrawing part of the promised funding) increased the scepticism of the Lebanese towards the central state. Distrust was greatest within communities whose loyalties were already weak. Given this background, the Lebanese affected by the war did not want to lose the opportunity to get some money.

*The village of Alma, for instance, also got help from other organisations and private groups. The Greek Catholic Church paid \$500 per family; the Protestant Church paid half of the real cost. Thus, some got two and a half the real damage. (Informant from Alma living in Beirut)*

However, in keeping with a trend common all over the Middle East (Mollica, 2011), land continued to be the main concern of South Lebanese Christians. Changing demographic trends increased people's attachment to land. The land became an extension of their ethno-religious identity. Meanwhile, Hizbullah's incursion was changing the Shia community's behaviour and status. The Shia community was quickly moving from being the poorest economic religious group to the strongest demographic component.

## Christian Land

After the war, land transactions became a priority within the Christian community. Christians from the village of Alma el-Shaab refused to sell land or houses to Christians from other villages, let alone to non-Christians.

*The Muhtar will not sign. We elect the Muhtar the same day we elect the mayor. He primarily looks after personal affairs [such as births or marriages]. However, in areas with no topographic records, he is also responsible for land transactions. In Alma he has three assistants, also elected with him. He can stop the transaction, for we have an understanding.* (Informant from Alma with an economic activity in Tyre)

The concept was clarified by another informant:

*Anyone willing to buy a lot [of land] must go to the Muhtar and sign a paper. The agreement is that the Muhtar will not allow the transaction unless the buyer is from Alma. Even Christians who are not from Alma cannot buy.* (Informant from Alma living in Beirut)

The Maronite priest stressed the point:

*Look, we have good relations with the other villages, not extremely good but good. We receive courtesy visits and we reciprocate. However, we must protect our land, for we do not have weapons. Here it is not possible to sell. We have an agreement with the Muhtar. Land just for the people of Alma.* (Abuna Marun, Alma el-Shaab Maronite parish priest)

The same priest was aware of what could be happening:

*Maybe, in the future, if someone asks for land... you know... people may lose their relation with land. We have the United Nations to help with money, but they do not provide work opportunities. After the war some families left Alma. Demographic figures are substantially stable; we even increase during the summer. We do ask our families to increase, although, at the end of the day, this is a family decision. Our land in South Lebanon is holy. We were here from the beginning. It is a reason for us to stay. Some people have strong links with the land, the houses, the cemeteries.* (Abuna Marun, Alma el-Shaab Maronite parish priest)

As a leading figure in Alma explained, the people of Alma are forced to engineer ways to protect their land:

*Last year, three girls living in Beirut inherited some properties in Alma. Someone had to ask a rich Almayy, now living in Dubai, to buy the land. Many lost their relation [author's italics] with the land and could sell.* (Informant from Alma)

A dramatic event closely tied to the issue of land took place in March of 2010 in the Christian village of Qaa. The event had a deep impact on the Christian population of Alma el-Shaab. The following is an account of that story as told by an informant from Alma:

*In Qaa [a Greek Catholic village, 135 kilometres from Beirut, on the Syrian border, close to Hermel] there is a large estate today belonging to the state. In the past, you could plant on it. Then the law changed and now you cannot plant anymore. Then, there is a Sunni village, Arsaal [some 45 kilometres from Qaa]. Years ago, people from Arsaal bought some land in that area at a very cheap price. People from Arsaal*

*now live there; they have sheep and goats. One day someone from Arsaal brought his sheep on Qaa land. A 70-year-old Qaa man told him not to bring the sheep because they destroy the trees. The Arsaal man called another person from Arsaal and told him the story. This man and other two came and killed the old man. Before he died, he gave the names of the killers. They escaped. In protest, Qaa men stopped the main road and asked the government to get the killers. Arsaal leaders came to say sorry in Qaa. God bless the soul of the deceased, but Qaa people are now paying for the mistake they made many years ago by selling their land.*

## The price to be paid

Officially, Hizbullah has no interest in land, despite its increasing membership and conflicting relations with other groups at the local level. Hizbullah tries, in fact, to maintain a national dimension to its struggle. *Waad*, for instance, is a branch of Hizbullah's reconstruction arm, *Jihad al-Bina*. It was named after the so-called 'truthful promise', the name given by Nasrallah to the capture of two Israeli soldiers on 12 July 2006. *Waad* completed all works in 2009, granting about \$10,000 per each family that had lost property. In contrast, the Lebanese government granted about \$53,000 to individual citizens whose units were destroyed and compensated for damaged property on a case-by-case basis. The process was apparently slowed because many people lacked legal documents for properties that were built illegally, and many others lost documents during the war.

Keeping in mind the larger issue of land transaction, Hizbullah's speed engendered in many Christians the fear that there would be a price to pay, sooner or later.

*All houses have been repaired. Hizbullah at the beginning was very rude [the reference is to the civil war]. Everybody thought they were going to make an Islamic country, even if it was never said publicly. But in Lebanon it is not easy to establish that kind of state. Hizbullah understood that they couldn't establish a country like Iran yet. Today, they [Hizbullah] keep their weapons for two reasons: first, to keep the Shia in their hands, present themselves as saviours [author's italics] and have an impact in electoral terms; second, since they are closer to Iran than Lebanon, being the strongest, they still have a long-term aim. Even the Lebanese army soldiers, in case they have to decide, would follow their Shia leaders. You see... it would be enough a fatwā [a religious opinion that in Shia tradition can be binding] as it happened during the civil war [1975-1990].* (Informant from Alma with an economic activity in Tyre)

The 2006 war showed how Christians were completely unarmed and weaker than ever:

*Our people are afraid. If they hear about a war,<sup>7</sup> they immediately leave their houses. When something happens, everyone leaves Alma.* (Abuna Marun, Alma el-Shaab Maronite parish priest)

Other Christian informants hold a different view, born from a fear of a failing central state:

*After every war, the government comes and says that they will pay, but then they do not. This time, when Hizbullah came, people immediately said yes. Not everyone signed in, of course, so not every damaged house got money. But I am sure not one of those who got money thinks that they have a debt with Hizbullah.* (Informant from Alma living in Beirut)

<sup>7</sup> As happened on 8 January 2009, when two rockets fired from South Lebanon hit the Israeli town of Nahariya, wounding two people. As was later proven, the attack came from a paramilitary Palestinian group, while Hizbullah assured the Lebanese government that it was not responsible. However, Israel promptly retaliated with five shells.

In 2009, before the national elections, and while Hizbullah militants were demonstrating against former Sunni Prime Minister Fuad Saniora, the universal language of cash outweighed sectarianism in the south. In the Shia village of Bint Jbeil, Sunni Qatar helped to repair all the religious buildings, including the Grand Mosque. Despite alleged government-imposed obstacles, Shia Iran helped with rebuilding Lebanon, and its engineers oversaw the reconstruction of schools, hospitals and places of worship (including ten churches and some Sunni mosques) (Macleod, 2007).

However, it was the relief machine set up by Hizbullah that worked:

*Hizbullah buys everything in Lebanon, for instance, cement. It is a ramified organisation, radicated in the territory, with restaurants and shops. Some of these were used to launder money. For instance, a restaurant can say its income was \$60,000 in one month, while it was nothing. In this way they can accumulate money in banks. No one will ask. The state does not check.* (Informant from Alma living in Tyre)

Clearly, as with the movement of Imam Sadr, the relationship between Hizbullah and Lebanon as a whole was one of identification-appropriation: patriotic and willing to save Lebanon from suffering (Nasr, 1985, p. 137-138). Meanwhile, the Israeli enemy was represented as 'evil', even in religious terms. Today, the external enemy is still Israel, and the internal enemies are still the leading elites of Lebanon. However, social aims are presented as priorities (here more efficient distribution of resources), followed by political aims (here increasing political participation among the growing Shia community).

Three years after the war, the Lebanese government reported some \$676 million spent on repairing damage to houses. The money came mainly through donations from countries like Saudi Arabia (\$306 million) and Kuwait (\$89 million). Tehran channelled hundreds of millions of dollars for reconstruction through Shia organisations and Hizbullah. However, it is difficult to say how much of this money went toward rebuilding the Dahiya, the organisation's military facilities, and its military capabilities. Hizbullah claims that the Lebanese government demonstrated weakness. The criticism mainly refers to the fact that Lebanese industrialists and farmers have not received compensation. However, according to the government, 93% of the sum was used to rebuild some 113,000 houses, mainly in southern Lebanon and in the Hizbullah stronghold. Finally, as Israeli sources argue, the Lebanese government gave about \$94 million to the families of 'martyrs' and people who were injured, while two countries with tense relations with the Lebanese government (Syria and Qatar) directly transferred funds to the owners of damaged houses (Peskin, 2009).

## Conclusions

In the 1970s, the Shia Imam Moussa Sadr taught that violence against internal Lebanese opponents must be rejected, while violence against the external enemy must be actively sought. Today, Sadr's heirs are struggling to balance their position between these two extremes. For the first time, however, extensive financial support placed the party in a position where it had to demonstrate managerial capabilities beyond religious lines.

Aside from the widely held belief that only a small portion of the money received by Hizbullah was used for relief purposes, many were concerned that the source of money was unknown. However, individuals who received the benefits (both Christians and Muslims) and the companies that received the money (both Christian and Muslim) never asked about it. But this South Lebanese ethnography raises another question that must be answered. Were the people giving the money part-time terrorists or not? Were they 'terrorists' only when perceived as acting along traditional Lebanese sectarian lines or even when giving money to anyone asking for it? After all, commerce in weapons is illegal, and

giving money that likely came from the same donor is also illegal. The money simply had a different aim and a different impact – and probably brought different expectations that the Christians of South Lebanon could easily appreciate themselves. This was especially true because, pace Pascal, there was no mediator (between Hizbullah and civilian Christians), and without mediation there cannot be an equal exchange.

First of all, post-war reconstruction efforts put Hizbullah under pressure. This was a test. As such, it meant huge involvement, control and deliverance. The party proved its structure, parallel as it was to the state. Hizbullah could deliver immediately. In the end, it was not the target of a single accusation, despite the fact that it used cash without giving receipts. The money was accepted by everyone (including Christians), the work was done well and no bribery was involved. When the war ended, Hizbullah men were carrying money in their cars in South Lebanon the very next day, and without escorts or weapons. Illegal money became legitimate by its very use, by the vacuum created by the state, and by the reliability of Hizbullah. No one complained about the money. Some informants told the author that they were happy to receive money from Hizbullah. Anyone who asked for money received it, even if only to replace a broken window.

Second, political loyalties in Lebanon have never been stable, especially during times of war. For centuries, South Lebanese Christians have lived in close proximity to their Shia Muslim neighbours. Alliances have often shifted, however. After the 2006 war, Hizbullah's relief actions surely caused some Christians to change sides. However, many of them shifted alliances when they found themselves trapped in the middle of Israel's war against Hizbullah, which eventually turned into a war against Lebanese civilians, regardless of their religious affiliations.

Third, the most important issue remained land. Christians accepting money (even money from potentially illegal sources) made some of them weaker in reference to land transaction and land usage in a highly sectarian society that is deeply affected by dramatic demographic change. The Christians interviewed by the author argued that they would not change their behaviour, as the case of Alma el-Shaab proves. They are, however, forced to devise ways to defend their land. In order to do so, they are willing to remain within the boundaries of Lebanese law. However, the fact that the state was 'absent' and that Christians received help (at least initially) either mostly or exclusively from Hizbullah, caused Christians to find themselves indebted to Hizbullah. They believe they are already weak and that it would be easy for Hizbullah to force them to leave. Furthermore, until Hizbullah's post-2006 war relief effort, these Christians had never accepted money, nor were they felt to be the weaker link between the Lebanese religious groups.

Finally, relief strengthened ties between Hizbullah and Iran but also brought new perspectives of Christian-Iranian relations in South Lebanon. While before the 2006 war some Christians fought Hizbullah and saw Israel as a natural Western ally, and many more thought that their loyalties to their central government were unshakable, relations have recently been significantly reframed.

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